

Testimony for Public Hearing  
Veteran Affairs Committee  
March 3, 2016

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Senate Bill 287: An Act Concerning Tuition and Fee Waivers for Veterans and Members of the Connecticut National Guard at Public Institutions of Higher Education.

Good Afternoon Senator Flexer, Representative Hennessey, ranking members, and esteemed members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee:

My name is Mike Castillo. I am a veteran of the war in Iraq. I am a father of a beautiful two-year-old girl, and I am a student in the UCONN part-time MBA program and a member of the Veteran Student Organization. I work for the CT Dept of Labor. As you are all aware, among many of the benefits state workers are fortunate enough to receive; free tuition is not one of them. While I am offered a small amount of money to reimburse some of the costs, I rely on the Combat Tuition waiver for the bulk of my educational costs. It has made the difference between my decision to go back to school and receive my MBA or not.

My story is reminiscent of almost every veteran who has taken advantage of the Montgomery GI Bill benefits offered. I could not afford college on my own. My parents were unable to provide any assistance at all as I was the oldest child in a modest household. I could not obtain scholarships to pave the way, and I was afraid of crippling student debt. So, in June, 2001 I joined the Connecticut Army National Guard after graduating high school. Like every other American, the events that Fall changed my life forever culminating in a deployment to Iraq with the 248<sup>th</sup> Engineer Co, of Norwich CT, in 2003. No one I knew joined the Army to go to war, but here we were, and we knew it was our responsibility to answer the call as service members.

The war has never left me, as it never can. When I came home I was troubled, and many of my friends were as well. I watched several of my closest friends fall into depression, and fail to cope with the realities of PTSD. They turned to drugs, alcohol and violence. They could not cope with the transition to civilian life after what they had been through. As you are all aware, the military was ill equipped to handle the injuries of the battlefield in 2003 and 2004. Walter Reed Hospital became a subject of scandal. The military could not provide an adequate support network to deal with the mental trauma that so many suffer from. Fortunately, I was able to focus my attention on school work. I used my GI Bill to go college, and kept the larger picture of a successful, professional career as my motivation to cope with PTSD and avoid the pitfalls destroying so many of my friends.

I attended Eastern Connecticut State University from 2006 to 2009. While there I took advantage of a fantastic Political Science department which allowed me the opportunity to take advantage of internships that left me with lifelong friends. I also took advantage of a fantastic Business Administration

department which supplemented my skills with many of those in demand by today's workforce, particularly that in Connecticut, a state with a large number of large corporations. Upon graduation, I was able to get a job with the CT Dept of Labor. I have used the skills I learned at Eastern and in the Army to benefit our great state in a number of ways including implementing two programs involved with criminal prosecution of fraud, which has to date saved our state over \$2,000,000 over the last 3 years. But as you are all aware, the nature of my profession is one that is prone to frequent layoffs. For that reason, after discussion with my wife about the impact on our family, I made the decision to go back to school and was accepted into the UCONN PMBA program. It isn't easy. We need to make constant sacrifices to make this happen.

The Combat Tuition Waiver was instrumental in my decision to go back. My wife and I could not afford the cost alone. With a two year old daughter, and an uncertain economic future, the idea of the debt incurred by completing a graduate degree is unacceptable. But I feel that I have earned my right to be in this program through the blood sweat and tears shed in the sands of Iraq. At this point in my life, I need the MBA degree, and I intend to obtain it as fast as possible to take the burden of my absence for school off of my family. Winter-session and Summer Session courses allow me to do that. Without them it would take me an additional two years to complete my degree. I may not have a job by then given our fiscal crisis. If I am not working, then I seriously do not know if I will be able to continue my education. The UCONN PMBA program is remarkable. Every class I have taken has immediately benefited me in my work. My degree not only benefits me, but it benefits my daughter by showing her that she can obtain anything she wishes in our society, in Future Connecticut. It benefits the Connecticut economy because I directly apply the skills I learn to my work and I directly save CT taxpayers. And my degree benefits those in need through volunteer work which I do on behalf of veterans as the Secretary and Treasurer of a non-profit organization called the Veterans Advocacy Center. Our goal is to reduce the 22 per day suicide rate of veterans, and the rates of veteran homelessness and substance abuse. While some may view the expansion of the Combat Tuition Waiver into Winter-session and Summer Session as minor contributions to overall veteran education, to veterans like me, these sessions are some of the most important.

In conclusion, please support this bill. In a time when our fiscal house is in question, this is a bill that generates directly to our society in so many ways. Our veteran student population consists of students with the sternest convictions. They are not in school for fun. We are in school to do our job and go home. That's what the military taught us to do. That's what we want to do. Please support this bill and let students like me in universities across Connecticut attend classes year round so that I may move on to the next step in my career, and hopefully take you all with me.

Thank you,

Respectfully,

Mike Castillo

Treasurer and Secretary  
Veterans Advocacy Center